



AN INDOORSMAN'S EXPERIENCE IN SOUTH CAROLINA'S GREAT OUTDOORS.

By Lawrence Ray

I admit, I'm not what you would describe as an avid outdoorsman.

I used to love the outdoors, but those were the days before I discovered how easy it is to live vicariously through the man on television as he swims with crocodiles. Now, my wife sometimes warns me that if I stay too long, the couch might become a permanent part of my anatomy. But my curiosity about what is outside the confines of my castle was finally stirred when I heard a colleague swear that the Edisto River was the world's longest free-flowing, blackwater river and offered one of the most relaxing canoe trips he's ever taken.

Could it be that South Carolina had more to offer than great cable TV? As a lifelong son of South Carolina, I thought that I knew the state pretty well. But I

had never actually made the effort to become a modern day Meriwether Lewis (of Lewis and Clark fame for the historically impaired) to discover for myself what the state had to offer. And so began my process of unearthing South Carolina's natural assets—its rivers, its forests and the trails that make them accessible to all of us.

My quest began by surfing through the S.C. Department of Parks, Recreation & Tourism's web site (www.travelsc.com). After all, I figured that they had to be outdoor experts. While reading about the state's parks, I found a link to the **South Carolina State Trails Program**. The info on trails was just what I was looking for, so I called and was referred to Jim Schmid, coordinator of the program. According to Schmid, the state is

overflowing with natural attractions that fit the needs of every type of enthusiast, from novice to expert.

Because I fit into the former category, I naturally wondered what would be appropriate for a beginner. The answer surprised me. It seems that there are different trails, established by a number of different organizations, that offer paths for enthusiasts of all ages to follow throughout and across the state. They include canoe and kayak trails, hiking and bike trails, and even natural history interpretive trails that highlight the best of what our state has to offer.

This was starting to sound even better. I realized that I could actually go forth and use these trails to explore South Carolina's outdoors without turning into Grizzly Adams and learning which

part of a cattail I needed to eat in order to survive. Seeing as how Mr. Lewis and Mr. Clark began their journey on a river, the Edisto River became my first objective.



THE EDISTO RIVER CANOE & KAYAK TRAIL

Now I was ready. I knew where to start. But there were new questions. What's the best way to get an expedition onto the river? This time I referred directly to the S.C. Trails web site (www.sctrails.net) and discovered the **Edisto River Canoe & Kayak Trail**.

The Edisto River Canoe & Kayak Trail was formed just over 12 years ago and named the first official canoe and kayak trail in South Carolina. It covers 66 miles of the Edisto River from Whetstone Crossroads near the intersection of Highways 21 and 61 to near Jacksonboro on US 17. The trail was developed to promote the wise use of the river and to protect it as a valuable natural resource. Although not yet designated a State Scenic River, the Edisto forms the northern border of the ACE Basin, an important watershed and natural area in South Carolina.

I contacted Jim Wescott, an Edisto River Canoe & Kayak Trail Commission board member. Wescott told me that there were a number of outfitters on and off the river who provided guided trips down the Edisto. He also said that the commission, based in Walterboro, offered guided river trips down the Edisto for individuals and groups throughout most of the year. After some arm-twisting and a promise that I could float, Wescott agreed to guide me on my first trip into the wilderness.

We arrived at **Colleton State Park** just before 9:30am. This was where my trip down the river would end, so I left my car just outside the park entrance, at the

commission's boat storage facility. I brought all of the supplies that Wescott had suggested—bathing suit, sunscreen, old tennis shoes, drinking water, sunglasses and a hat. I also brought several items that he didn't suggest—including a pocketknife that I hoped would protect me from any wildlife we happened to see along the way or to forage for food if I became hopelessly lost.

Wescott somehow decided that I

looked river worthy and suggested that we use kayaks to cruise the river. Not knowing any better, I said no problem, and we drove to our drop-off point 7.5 miles up river—Green Pond Church Landing. We unloaded our kayaks and made sure everything was secure before venturing onto the water.

The water was like a sheet of glass and I thought it odd that there was no current visible, until Wescott explained that we



The South Carolina Waterways offer adventure for experienced as well as novice kayakers.



Every fisherman has a favorite spot and many of those are in the state parks of South Carolina's Lowcountry.

were in one of the river's many oxbows, crescent-shaped channels of water indicative of a mature river. Paddling along the oxbow, cypress knees lined the water in packs, and I could see the calls of unidentified various wildlife. Just imagine being on the set of Jurassic Park. It was beautiful. I hoped that my pocketknife would be enough.

As I slowly followed Wescott through the oxbow, he continually looked back to make sure that I was adequately handling the kayak. As it turned out, it wasn't that hard, even for a couch potato. Still, I was fortunate to be accompanied by a certified Edisto River guide who was drilled in river safety and lifesaving—a must if you have never been on the river. The reason is that the river hides perils that could trap inexperienced boaters: submerged stumps that could overturn a boat, and strainers—submerged trees that can capture an unsuspecting person between its limbs and the current.

Wescott knew where he was going, and he led us round several submerged obstacles as we slowly knifed our way along the oxbow. He described some of the wildlife that we might see once we made it into the main channel of the river. I was pumped! Not only was this

trip already exceptional, but I might be able to glimpse an otter, blue heron or maybe even an eagle. I could do without seeing snakes, alligators or the wasp nests that cling to trees along the banks and around the river.

When we reached the main channel of the river, we paddled and drifted at a leisurely pace. I was struck by a feeling of isolation. I was jolted back to reality when Wescott motioned that we should stop at one of the many sandbars along the riverbank. It was a welcome relief. I found sitting in the kayak comfortable while I was paddling down the river, but I realized that it wasn't a natural position for me as soon as I got out. The stretch was therapeutic. Soon after, I got a taste of what is a tradition for many of the paddlers who use the river as their playground. Wescott pulled a cooler from his kayak filled with cold, fresh watermelon slices. It brought back pleasant memories of submerging a watermelon in a creek while I swam with my friends and then

gorging on the cool, sweet fruit before heading home for supper. Life doesn't get much better.

After a refreshing dip in the river, we were back in our kayaks and headed down the main channel of the Edisto. Wescott had been paddling under the extended arms of the trees that lined the banks of the river. I, on the other hand, made every effort to stay away from trees. I had heard too many stories (many probably not true) of boaters bumping into tree limbs and knocking snakes into their boats, and I wasn't about to let this happen to me. I finally had to ask him why he was doing something I thought was so obviously detrimental to his long-term health. The answer expanded my education into a practical aspect of kayaking along the Edisto. It was hot, and my guide was keeping as cool as possible in the shade of the trees along the bank. The water level was low and allowed him to keep well below the extended branches. I tried it too and he was right.

Sliding through the water, we saw several sites where hardy souls had pitched a tent and set up camp. While it looked like fun, it seemed a little too primitive.

That was when Wescott told me that there were campsites available (along with showers) at two state parks along the Edisto—**Colleton State Park** and **Givhans Ferry State Park**, which offers rental cabins as well.

As we glided semi-silently around a bend, we startled a blue heron, a truly majestic bird that thrives along the banks of the lower Edisto. It flew down river, then turned and flew right back over us. Turtles, too many to count, watched us as we slipped by. He may have been joking, but Wescott said that several places on the bank showed evidence of alligators. A number of times, we passed by egrets perched on limbs near the riverbank. Wescott even pointed out an adolescent bald eagle gliding above the trees in search of prey.



As we neared the landing at Colleton State Park, I proclaimed (to myself) that I was no longer a true novice. I realized that I had discovered an outdoor activity that I could enjoy, even develop a love for. I also realized that I had found a resource that could provide nearly unlimited recreational adventures. Try these trails of the S.C. Trails Program with your family or a friend. You'll definitely see South Carolina in a new light.

For more information on the Edisto River Canoe and Kayak Trail, call 843-549-9595.

**SWAMP
BOARDWALK BIRDWALK—
FRANCIS BEIDLER FOREST
(Birding Trail)**

The National Audubon Society's Francis Beidler Forest is located in Four Holes Swamp. You will enjoy this rich habitat that features the largest virgin stand of bald cypress and tupelo trees in the world. In fact, some of the giant bald cypress trees are more than 1,000 years old. Birds are easily

spotted during winter and spring. From the boardwalk, you might also glimpse other wildlife, including turtles and alligators. Located near Harleyville, S.C.

Call the visitor's center for fees, directions and to find out about other programs at 843-462-2150.

